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ABSTRACT

French became the foremost medium of communication in Europe in the 18th century. In Germany the most widely used French textbook was Johan Valentin Meidinger's "Practische Franzoesische Grammatik." This textbook was apparently a huge success from the pedagogical and the commercial points of view. With a few minor revisions, it would probably attract a fair share of the textbook market today. Meidinger claimed that adults could use the book and learn French on their own, although the task would be easier if a good instructor were available. The book includes a thorough treatment of the French phonetic system, basic vocabulary, grammar and translation exercises, reading lessons (140 short stories and anecdotes), idioms, lessons on orthography, punctuation, and the use of diacritical marks, extensive discussion of the nine parts of speech (the verb structure receives considerable attention), explanations of sentence structure and word order, word puzzles, and a glossary of over 10,000 items. (CFM)

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A HISTORICAL VIGNETTE: LANGUAGE LEARNING EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY STYLE

Howard H. Kalwies

The learning of another language is an ancient art. Only a few people grow up in a bilingual home or have the good fortune of being reared in a foreign country where the absorption of a foreign language comes natural. The rest of humanity, if they desire to learn another language, have to rely on some expert to teach them a second language. The French language, which had been prominent during the Middle Ages, had become once more the foremost medium of communication in Europe during the eighteenth century.¹ French teachers, therefore, were in great demand and their methods of language pedagogy became highly refined; among these Johan Valentin Meidinger's *Practische Französische Grammatik*² had a particular appeal.

This instruction manual is roughly equivalent in scope and content to our elementary and intermediate textbooks. With only a few changes it could even be palmed off as a "modern" work. Judging from the numerous editions and pirated versions which circulated during the author's lifetime (we are dealing here with the 8th authorized ed.), this grammar must have enjoyed great success throughout the German empire and abroad. In the privileges, given at Florence, Italy, May 6, 1790, Emperor Leopold X expressly forbade the unauthorized printing and selling of Meidinger's *Grammatik* (pp. III-IV); a fair indicator that unscrupulous individuals were turning a quick profit at the expense of the author. The latter also procured exclusive rights from the Federation of Suisse Cantons and free towns. In the first Preface to his eighth edition, Meidinger complains of numerous pirated and grossly inaccurate versions which were selling in Switzerland under his name. He fought back by obtaining author's rights (for the 5th and subsequent eds.) and by revising and enlarging his previous *Grammatik*.

The author's introductory remarks may elicit a nod of

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sympathy from his modern colleagues as he muses that among his acquaintances he knows several who after eight, ten, or even twelve years of language instruction and much application still speak French incorrectly and whose writing is even worse.³ Meidinger believes that the shortest and the best way to learn French is the grammar-translation method. He advises his fellow teachers to explain the rules of grammar to their students at the beginning of each lesson and to introduce the necessary vocabulary: "Mithin wird diejenige Person, die nur ein wenig gesunden Menschenverstand hat, und sich die Regeln und Wörter vorher recht eingeprägt, diese Aufgabe mit geringer Mühe mündlich und schriftlich übersetzen können, und dadurch in kurzer Zeit in den Stand gesetzt werden, rein Französisch zu sprechen und zu schreiben."⁴ The author feels that this approach would be faster and better than the conventional method of reading books or frequenting native speakers.

His reasons for writing a new grammar are fairly straight-forward. His students had complained that they were unable to follow the muddled and complicated explanations in existing texts; hence the author's resolve to write his own textbook which could be understood by unlettered adults and by women ("den Unstudierten und dem Frauenzimmer," p. IX).⁵ After stating the time-honored cliché that the learning of a foreign language will advance the understanding of one's mother tongue, Meidinger explains why he introduces a basic vocabulary. Most textbooks on the market lack a practical, every-day dictionary, and those which !ature one sacrifice the basic idioms in favor of useless abstractions. He further intends to present his students with lessons on the nine parts of speech, on the syntactical differences between French and German, and a discussion on idioms and gallicisms. For younger students he recommends the reading of his short stories and anecdotes which contain a wealth of such *tourmures*. He warns fellow instructors against the dangers of rote learning and the flogging of pupils if they fail to learn their lessons by heart. He deems such stern measures useless since pupils will soon forget what they have learned by heart under stress. It would be more profitable to engage the student in exercises which would turn precept into practice (pp. VII-VIII).

The author's instructions on how to use his *Grammatik* are most informative. He proposes that the novice should first learn how to read French, either on his own or with the help of a teacher, by studying and practicing the rules of pronunciation (phonetics, in other words). Once these precepts are learned, the student then proceeds to read various conversations with his instructor (the dialog approach). After each dialog the beginner should then learn the gender and number of all nouns used. This is followed by an oral and

a written translation of each conversation (the grammar-translation method). Before attempting to translate, however, the grammar, the vocabulary and the idioms are to be reviewed again by the student. The written exercises are graded according to difficulty, and Meidinger states that the initial ones are kept as close to German syntax as possible in order to facilitate the pupil's task. Should the latter still make mistakes in his written assignments, the instructor should not correct the errors but should mark them in red ink and refer the student to the appropriate grammatical rule, which would enable him to correct his own mistakes (the modern reinforcement and self-correcting method used in workbooks). For variety's sake the author recommends the alternating of grammar and reading lessons. To this end he included a total of 140 short stories and anecdotes (our modern "Reader"). He also suggests that the student learn the accompanying vocabulary and idioms before each reading exercise; and afterwards he should conjugate all occurring verbs. Once these drills have taken place, the entire story is to be reviewed again, only this time in the question-answer ploy, e.g.:

Question: Qui étoit allé un jour dans une boutique?

Answer: Un Gentilhomme.

Q. Pourquoi y étoit-il allé?

A. Pour acheter quelques marchandises.

Q. Qu'est-ce qu'il disoit comme il trouva qu'on les mettoit à un prix trop haut?

A. Qu'étant des amis de la maison, on ne devoit pas lui vendre si cher.

Q. Que lui répond le Marchant?

A. Il faut que je gagne ma vie avec mes amis; car pour mes ennemis ils ne viennent pas chés moi (p. XI).

The above dialog is an open book exercise which must be followed by a closed-book, oral translation. The teacher reads the same story to his student in German, sentence by sentence; the latter then translates it back into French, orally. Meidinger further suggests repetition as a reenforcer and also recommends that the student be asked to translate back into French his written assignments which consisted of French to German translations. "Experts will agree with me," says the author, "that this is the easiest and the most skillful way to learn the French language in a short period of time. It has to be done in this way, and if it does not work, then we know that common sense is lacking: and if that is wanting, God help us!"⁶

Meidinger even advertises his *Grammatik* as a kind of Home Study Course. He believes that any adult could use his grammar and his method and learn a fair amount of French on his own. He admits, however, that the task would be easier if a good instructor were at hand (pp. XI-XII). For more advanced students he recommends a

good dictionary, much reading, and contact with native speakers. But for those who are still at the intermediate stages of language learning, he proffers his revised and enlarged edition of *Lecture pour les jeunes gens qui apprennent le Français*.

In this regard the author's marketing methods are rather informative. The above reader is available from the author for 54 kr. unbound, or for 1 fl. 6 kr. bound. His *Grammatik* sells for 1 Gulden Reichsgeld (softback), or for 1 Gulden 12 kr. hardback. Anyone buying ten or more copies will receive an eleventh copy free (the modern desk copy). Book dealers are promised a hefty rebate (probably the customary 20% institutional discount of today). To anyone ordering several copies of his *Lecture pour les jeunes gens*, Meidinger promises *einen beträchtliche Rabat* (a generous rebate) on his *Géographie à l'usage de la jeunesse* which normally sells for 36 kr. (the package deal). For those students who have advanced beyond his *Grammatik*, our author-teacher recommends his *Deutsche Briefe und Aufsätze* which were recently completed (1792) and which sell for 36/45 kr., respectively. Professor Meidinger, no doubt, must have been one of the most enterprising foreign language teachers of his time: teaching, writing, advertising and marketing his own works. Given the prevailing enthusiasm for anything French in eighteenth-century Germany, we would even wager that Herr Meidinger was not carried to his grave in a *corbillard des pauvres*.

The contents of the *Grammatik* are not arranged according to lessons but are grouped together under fourteen major divisions which, in turn, are subdivided into paragraphs. These fourteen parts are not always clearly labeled, but they fall under the following general headings: Grammar/Idioms/Translation Exercises/Personal Letter Writing/Commercial Correspondence/Basic Vocabulary (Dictionary)/*Faux amis*/Conversation Topics/Short Stories and Anecdotes/Word Puzzles/A Glossary for the Short Stories/ Lists of Christian Names and Their Historical Meanings/Multiplication Tables/French Protocol. Since parts II, VI, VII, X and XI deal essentially with related matters, namely vocabulary and idioms, we shall treat these as one unit.

Part I (pp. 1-254), the Grammar, is perhaps of greatest interest to us. The author's own arrangement progresses from paragraphs 1-214 in which he treats over one-hundred identifiable topics ranging from the alphabet to the use of pleonasms. He introduces each letter of the alphabet (the *w* is footnoted) and gives an interlinear, phonetic transcription for all letters which are pronounced differently in French than in German, e.g.: *H* /asch/, *Y* /igrek/, *Z* /säde/, etc. All vowels and consonants are further discussed in chronological order. Word samples are generously supplied for each phoneme, and where variations of the same sound are possible, such

as final consonants in liaison, vowels in dieresis, or exceptions to any general rule, attention is drawn to them graphically with the help of a pointed hand . In his examples on syllabification and liaison we found only one which has since become archaic: *trop aware*, for instance, is glossed as *tro-pawar*. The shortest entry involves the letter *B* which reads: "wird immer ausgesprochen, ausser in *le plomb*" ("is always pronounced, except in *le plomb*"). As could be expected, the letter *E* received the greatest attention from the author.

Since the IPA did not exist, the author had to come up with his own phonetic transcription. He did not miss a trick. Diphthongs and exceptions to general rules are carefully noted. He has ten separate entries for the unaccented *E*. Curiously enough *E* before *m* and *n*, as in *l'examen*, was not yet nasalized. Two centuries of evolution or governmental decrees have, naturally, altered the pronunciation of French to some degree, hence the author's careful distinction between *ai* and *a* spelling, as in *Sardaigne* (pron. Sardan), or the *ao* combination, as in *faon/paon/taon/Saone*, the *o* having no phonetic value whatsoever, the latter still being valid. The author's hazy distinction between /ø/ and /œ/, however, is no longer acceptable on either side of the Atlantic. The *eux*, in *Europe* and in *heureux* (first syllable) are given the phonetic equivalent of /y/ ("eu wird wie ün ausgesprochen"). His rule on the denasalization of *im* and *in*, however, is still worth repeating: "Wenn nach *im* und *in* ein Vocal, oder ein ander *m* oder *n* folgt, so wird es wie *i* ausgesprochen."⁷ His discussion of the letter *X*, too, is very commendable. He lists five possible pronunciations /ks/, /gs/, /ss/, /z/, and, of course, /-/ (zero pron.) as in *auxquels*, etc.

The advantages of such a thorough treatment of the entire French phonetic system right from the start should be obvious to any language teacher. Yet Meidinger is not merely content to have his students parrot incomprehensible sounds, each French word used by him in his exercises carries a lexical meaning in German. Thus a student acquires not only the phonetic structure of the French language but becomes exposed to a basic vocabulary of c. 800 items by the time he graduates from the alphabet to the *Leseübungen* (reading exercises).⁸ These are followed by short lessons on orthography, punctuation, and the use of diacritical marks. We retain only this quaint custom: The vocative (polite) address of *Vous* and *Votre* (poss. adj.) in letters is always capitalized.

The author's treatment of the nine parts of speech is quite extensive. Beginning with the articles and ending with the interjections, he discusses each category thoroughly. The articles (l'article défini/indéfini/d'unité/partitif) are introduced according to (a) gender, (b) number, and (c) case

(nominative/genetive/dative/accusative/vocative/& ablative). Verbs are divided into six groups, for example: les verbes auxiliaires/actifs/passifs/réciproques/impersonnels/& neutres. The latter are comprised of all verbs which can be used only in the third person singular, e.g., *il tonne, il neige*, etc. After an initial explanation of each part of speech and its subheadings, a multitude of exercises are given for each category. In the case of the articles alone, more than thirty-nine paragraphs (lessons) are given, complete with fill-in exercises. Only Grevisse, in his *Bon Usage*, is more minute!

The verb structure receives a great deal of attention. Their discussion covers ninety-eight pages. While their coverage is total from every conceivable angle, we must observe that the author introduces the use of various tenses already in his fifth paragraph on the definitive article, e.g.: "*Ich habe heute gesehen die Schwester der Königin, und die Tochter der Fürstin*" (p. 31).⁹ The initial translation exercises usually contain no more than five or six sentences, and each paragraph or lesson lists in chronological order the vocabulary necessary for their translation. In the above example, the initial *Ich habe gesehen* (present perfect) is simply glossed as *j'ai vu* (passé composé) without any further hint as to the differences in tenses. In this manner the student is introduced to all the spoken tenses long before any formal discussion of them takes place.

The conjugation of verbs is taught in the same indirect fashion as the use of tenses. Meidinger groups all regular verbs into four categories, *-er, -ir, -oir, and -re* verbs. In his formal lesson on the conjugation of verbs, his tables show the customary patterns for *parler/finir/recevoir/& vendre*. Only his labels are worthy of retention for curiosity's sake. Our present *passé composé, passé simple, passé interieur* and the *subjonctif* are labeled *parfait composé, 2. imparfait, 2. plusque-parfait, and conjonctif*, respectively. The formal lessons on conjugation are followed by exercises in syntax which have the breadth and scope of J. E. Mansion's *Exercises in French Syntax* (D. C. Heath, n.d.). All verb categories and all tenses are thoroughly treated. Translations become more complex and more extensive as the student advances; one example may suffice; "*Es mag scheien, und ich wollte dass es noch mehr schneiete, und dass es fröhre; denn ich finde mich immer sehr wohl wann es recht kalt ist*" (p. 172). The author simply does not miss a trick.

Word order, i.e., the difference between French and German word order is taught by him in a rather ingenious way. He numbers all grammatical units from one to twelve and contrasts these with their German counterparts, e.g.:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Si je ne vous en ai pas encore fait savoir mon sentiment par une lettre,											

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 c'est qu'on ne me l'a pas sitôt voulu mander.
 1 2 4 11 5 8 3 7 6 12
 Dass ich Ihnen meine Meinung darüber noch nicht habe durch einen Brief
 10 9 1 2 4 5 3 7 8 6 9
 wissen lassen, das macht, dass man mir es nicht so bald hat wollen
 10
 berichten (p. 217).

With the help of this and similar models the author teaches his students proper sentence structure and word order. Each of the twelve categories, illustrating the sequential arrangement of the French sentence (if all elements were used simultaneously, of course), are discussed, identified, and elaborated on individually. But beyond their one-paragraph treatment, Meidinger thinks it best to have his students grasp the differences between French and German syntax through translation.

The lexical aspects of the *Grammatik* are simply overwhelming. Five of the fourteen chapters deal exclusively with idioms, basic vocabulary, *faux amis*, word puzzles, and a glossary covering more than 10,000 items. Since all oral and translation exercises carry their own lexical entries, the total vocabulary surpasses the 16,000 mark. Meidinger had planned it this way, of course, he wanted his primer to contain as much useful vocabulary as possible. His lexical entries are even arranged according to conversation topics. Even a businessman could find practical information on how to compose a commercial letter in French or how to claim payment for goods shipped. Most of these lexical entries are still up-to-date, although some have fallen prey to the ever grinding wheel of desuetude, e.g.: "zu Hülfe," à l'aide (au secours!); "Gestern abend," hier au soir (hier soir), etc.

All told, Meidinger's *Grammatik* must have been a smashing success from the pedagogical and the commercial points of view. With a little "face lifting," to include at least a few slick photographs for the culture buffs, pattern drills, to soothe the "oral approach" enthusiasts, a more modern labeling method, to keep the linguists happy, and a small number of other modern trappings, this *Grammatik*, if reprinted, may not become a bestseller, but it probably would attract its fair share of the textbook market.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The December 1976 issue of the *Modern Language Journal* (pages 471-493) carries several timely tips for the language teacher and the profession—all quotes from *MLJ* articles from 1917-1922. Professor Kalwies' article shows similar concerns for the improvement of instruction were very much in evidence in the eighteenth century . . .

NOTES

¹See Louis Réau, *L'Europe française au siècle des lumières*. Paris: Michel, 1971.

²wodurch man diese Sprache auf eine ganz neue und sehr leichte Art in kurzer Zeit gründlich erlernen kann. Von Johan Valentin Meidinger, Lehrer der Französischen und Italienischen Sprache zu Frankfurt am Main . . . Zu haben bei dem Verfasser, wie auch in allen Buchhandlungen Deutschlands, 1792. pp. XVIII-582, in-8°.

³"Ich kenne verschiedene Personen die acht, zehn, bis zwölf Jahre Französisch gelernt haben, und mit all ihrem Fleisse, sehr fehlerhaft sprechen, und noch fehlerhafter schreiben" (p. VI).

⁴"It will thus be possible even for a person of average intelligence to translate the lessons orally and in writing, with a minimum of effort, after having committed to memory the precepts and the vocabulary, and thus enabling him to speak and write a flawless French in the shortest time" (p. VII).

⁵The revisions effected in editions six and seven were due to feedback from students and fellow teachers. Their novelty lies in the inclusion of uneducated adults and women (for whom this grammar, presumably, was written as a self-study course) and the change in grammatical terminology from Latin to German.

⁶"Kenner werden mir eingestehen, dass diese die leichteste Art ist, die Französische Sprache in kurzer Zeit kunstgemäss zu lernen. Auf diese Weise muss es gehn; geht's nicht, so fehlt es an gesundem Menschenverstande: und wenn der fehlt, da hilf lieber Herr Gott!" (p. XI).

⁷"When a vowel or another *m* or *n* follows *in* or *in*, read it like an *i*."

⁸How different are the exercises in Belasco-Valdman's *College French in the New Key* (D. C. Heath, 1965), for example, where students have to repeat linguistically sound, but otherwise meaningless minimal pairs, lesson after lesson. Or how would an eighteenth-century student feel if he had to rely on the carefully controlled vocabulary (c. 3000 entries) of T. H. Brown's *French* . . . (2nd ed., McGraw-Hill, 1971)?

It is in no way our intention to discuss the merits or demerits of the two texts cited. We merely wish to point out that they represent current trends in foreign language pedagogy.

⁹"I saw the king's sister and the daughter of the duchess today." As stated, Meidinger distorts the German syntax on purpose. In proper sequence, the above sentence should read: "Ich habe heute die Schwester der Königin, und die Tochter der Fürstin gesehen." By placing the past participle *gesehen* closer to the auxiliary verb *haben*, as would be the proper word order in French, the author spares his student the mistake of fracturing the French syntax in his translation exercises.

Students of the classics may vaguely recall a similar practice prevalent in America until the 1950's when interlinear translations of Latin and Greek authors were in style, advocating a "natural word order."